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Lives of Pleasure: A Comparative Essay on Cārvāka and Epicurean Ethics

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1. INTRODUCTION

A long-lived and lively tradition of materialist philosophers flourished in classical India and in classical Greece. We know of their views from fragments and testimony handed down in the texts of their opponents and in compendia summarizing and collecting the views of ancient philosophers.¹ Few, if any, substantial works are available to us, although we may yet hope that more works will be discovered.² Consequently, the fragments and testimony that we do have must be carefully transplanted and pruned by close textual criticism to nurture the original root of their views and to see what philosophies may yet bloom.

A consequence of the fragmentary condition of these texts is that few students are introduced to them. Even in American universities in which ancient Greek philosophers receive special attention, courses usually hew closely to the Socratic tradition of Plato and Aristotle, sometimes dipping a toe in the water of Thales or perusing the epistles of Epicurus. When philosophy students study classical Indian philosophy, they are not likely to encounter the Indian materialists, the Cārvākas (Mittal 1974, 36–41; Franco and Preisendanz 1998; King 1999, 17–8; Bhattacharya 2010; Bhattacharya 2011, 131–5; Gokhale 2015, 1–22).³ Prominent anthologies apologetically leave them to one side to make more room for their Brāhminical, Buddhist, and Jaina opponents. When they are included, they are often described as the exception that makes

the rule: that Indian philosophy is fundamentally spiritual and soteriological, offering guidance on salvation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. As Mills (2015, 499) has pointed out, in the General Introduction to *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy*, Radhakrishnan and Moore (1989, xvii–xxxi) frequently use the phrase “except the Cārvāka” because the Cārvāka materialist and antireligious perspective does not fit the description of the spirituality of Indian philosophy. Consequently, because the Cārvākas denied the efficacy of religious acts and the existence of gods and the afterlife, they are considered atypical and, hence, justifiably given little attention without loss. Accordingly, this presupposition about the spiritual essence of Indian philosophy tends to reinforce itself (King 1999, 1–23).

Besides their materialist and antireligious perspective, the Cārvākas are also often believed to have advocated a vulgar hedonism that valorized a life of unrestrained sensualist excess (Riepe 1956; Shastri 1957, 30–6). Recent scholarship, however, has shown that the evidence is not decisive on this view (Bhattacharya 2011, 201–2). The reputation of sensualist excess is likely an excrescence of their views as framed by their opponents, from whom we have received the extant fragments and testimony. Moreover, this charge of vulgar hedonism by uncharitable opponents has suggested a comparison: Several scholars have thought to repair the Cārvākas’ reputation by suggesting they may have advocated a hedonistic ethics akin to the ancient Greek Epicureans (Barua 1921, 288–90; Basham 1951, 6, 17; Warder 1956, 55; King 1999, 19; McEvilley 2002, 602; Bhattacharya 2011, 10, 29–30, 125–6, 170–1; Del Toso 2011, 185, 199; Gokhale 2015, 158, 160).⁴ Epicurus recommended a life of simplicity, not excess (*Ep. Men.* 132 = Diog. Laert. 10.132). But the Epicureans’ opponents, especially the early Christian philosophers of late antiquity, misrepresented their views (Ramelli 2014, 6).⁵ As we know, the English word “epicure” does not mean one who lives simply but rather one who indulges in the

pleasures of fine food and drink. Contrast “epicure” with the English “stoic” (tough, patient, equanimous) which reflects a more accurate reception from its philosophical origins. Given this comparison to the Epicureans, there is reason to suppose the Cārvākas were similarly misinterpreted, especially considering other philosophical similarities to the Epicureans. As a summary, the Cārvākas and Epicureans accept several similar philosophical doctrines, including empiricism, materialism, and probably hedonism. Most of all, their philosophies share a naturalistic approach.

Although this comparison is suggestive and widely noted in the scholarship, to my knowledge, it has remained only a suggestion. Hence, the purpose of this essay is, by way of elaborating this comparison, to develop an interpretation of Cārvāka ethics so as to elicit a more coherent and positive account of Cārvāka philosophy. Whereas the interpretation of Epicureanism I offer here is for the most part well known, placing the Cārvākas’ philosophy alongside the Epicureans’ helps us see what arguments they probably offered in favor of their views. In the following sections, I first outline the Cārvāka and Epicurean doctrines of empiricism and materialism (section 2). Then, I turn to two comparative topics in Cārvāka and Epicurean ethics: Cārvāka and Epicurean views on eliminating irrational fears caused by superstition (section 3) and their understanding of pleasure as the goal of human action and life (section 4).

2. BASIC DOCTRINES

The Cārvākas and Epicureans shared several basic philosophical doctrines. They both held that knowledge is grounded in sense-perception and whatever we know is either directly perceived or inferred from sense-perception (empiricism).⁶ They also both held that only matter is real and

whatever exists, including mind, is explainable in terms of matter (materialism).⁷ These two philosophical doctrines support and provide a basis for their ethical views.

2.1 Empiricism

The Epicureans in the Hellenistic world and the Cārvākas in India both began with an intuitive claim: What we know is based on what we perceive with our senses. The Epicureans held that all sense-perceptions are true and that error is introduced by mistaken judgments about the sense-perceptions (Diog. Laert. 10.31–34). Judgments based on sense-perception await confirmation by perceptual evidence or disconfirmation by perceptual counterevidence (Diog. Laert. 10.34; cf. *RS* 24 =Diog. Laert. 10.147). The classic Epicurean example is seeing a tower at a distance (Diog. Laert. 10.34). If we form the judgment that the tower is round, the judgment is neither true nor false; rather, it awaits confirmation. When we approach closer and discover the tower is square, new perceptual evidence disconfirms the prior judgment, and we are compelled to formulate a new corrected judgment. Hence, perceptual experience forms the body of evidence against which all judgments are tested.

Although the evidence is not always clear, the Cārvākas held that sense-perception is our secure means to knowledge (*Sarva-darśana-saṃgraha* [=SDS], ch. 1, 3). Some Cārvākas, as in the *SDS*, held that sense-perception was the sole secure means to knowledge. Others, like the Cārvāka commentator Purandara (ca. seventh century CE) advocated a position much like the Epicureans: Sense-perception was a secure means to knowledge and also reasoning (inference) confirmed by sense-perceptions. Specifically, Purandara accepted inference confirmed by sense-perception but denied that inference was a secure means to knowledge about objects beyond the world—the gods, the afterlife, and so on (Bhattacharya 2011, 82, 90). We should note, however, that the only wholly extant Cārvāka work, Jayarāṣi's *Tattva-upaplava-siṃha* (=TUS), is

skeptical, concluding that there is no secure means to knowledge. What may unify all these views is that Cārvāka empiricism (or skepticism) targeted religion—their Brāhminical, Buddhist, and Jaina opponents—showing that there was no evidence in favor of believing in karmic retribution, gods, an afterlife, or the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (Franco 1987, 8; Mills 2015, 522–4; Franco 2018).

2.2 Materialism

Given that sense-perception is the basis of knowledge, it follows that what exists are material bodies because material bodies are what we perceive with our senses. Accordingly, the Cārvākas held that what ultimately exists are the material elements earth, water, fire, and air, and whatever else there is are aggregates of these (*TUS* 0.2; *SDS*, ch. 1, 2–3). Mind too is material or, at least, emerges from the material elements. The Cārvākas liken it to bubbles of fermentation (and the inebriating power of alcohol) that surface only if the proper ingredients are mixed together (*SDS*, ch. 1, 3). Hence, minds emerge only in human bodies and without which they cease to be.

The Cārvākas are also associated with a view roughly translated as “naturalism” (*svabhāvavāda*) (Bhattacharya 2011, 79, 87; Bhattacharya 2012). Naturalism in the Indian context is a theory that initially explained first causes of the cosmos but later also the causes of the essential characteristics of particular things. Franco and Preisendanz (1998, 179) take this to mean that the Cārvākas only accepted material causes to explain why things are what they are: It is “due to their own nature,” (*svabhāva*). In this sense, Cārvāka naturalism is like the naturalism of modern Anglophone philosophy: It denies the need to suppose the existence of supernatural causes, like god or karma, to explain the order of nature.

Beyond these points, the evidence is scant. Were the Cārvākas atomists besides materialists? Would they accept that there is empty space through which matter moves? The

Cārvākas of the *SDS* would have denied atoms and void because they must be inferred, but Cārvākas like Purandara would have probably entertained the arguments. Jayarāśi, of course, denied materialism (*TUS* 0.3).⁸

The evidence for the Epicureans is better. Diogenes Laërtius preserves a letter written by Epicurus, outlining his views on physics (*Ep. Hdt.* 34–83 = Diog. Laert. 10.34–83). According to Epicurus, nothing new comes into existence nor does anything that exists cease to be (*Ep. Hdt.* 38–9). In other words, Epicurus argued for a principle of conservation (Long and Sedley 1987, 1: 26–7; Sedley 1999; Konstan 2020). Whatever exists is made up of bodies and void; sense-perception serves as evidence for bodies, reasoning from sense-perception for void (*Ep. Hdt.* 39). A sketch of the argument is if there were no void, there would be no motion, but because we do perceive motion, there must be void (*Ep. Hdt.* 40). Among bodies, some are compounds, others are what make up compounds, and what make up compounds are indivisible, unchangeable, eternal, incomprehensibly numerous in shape, and unlimited in number (*Ep. Hdt.* 41–5). The void, through which atoms continuously fall, move, and collide, is also unlimited in extent (*Ep. Hdt.* 42–3). From these materialist principles, Epicurus can explain all gross physical phenomena and all mental phenomena as fundamentally the interaction of atomic arrangements moving through empty space. Even mind is an atomic structure, albeit a very fine one, which Epicurus compared to breath, wind, or heat (*Ep. Hdt.* 63). Like the Cārvākas, he also held that once the body perishes, the mind too is dispersed (*Ep. Hdt.* 65)

3. SUPERSTITION

The Epicurean and Cārvāka naturalistic approach to philosophy served as the foundation for their critiques of religion. Religion, in their view, was superstition or, in its traditional forms, involved superstitious beliefs and practices, which diminished human happiness.⁹ Their critiques of

religion were intended to liberate us from fears about the gods and anxieties about what will happen after we die. Ultimately, either the gods do not exist or they have no concern for human affairs. Hence, we have no need to fear them. Moreover, when we die, our minds and bodies return to their fundamental material constituents. Hence, there is no other life beyond this one to be anxious about. The ethical goal of these critiques is freedom from painful emotional states. This freedom contributes to a pleasant and peaceful life.

3.1 The Epicurean Criticism of Popular Religion and the Fear of Death

In the opening book of his didactic poem *De rerum natura*, the Roman Epicurean Lucretius introduces Epicurus as a Greek hero opposing superstition (*religio*) with his scientific natural philosophy:

When all could see that human life lay groveling ignominiously in the dust, crushed beneath the grinding weight of superstition [*religio*], which from the celestial regions displayed its face, lowering over mortals with hideous scowl, the first who dared to lift mortal eyes to challenge it, the first who ventured to confront it boldly, was a Greek. This man neither the reputation of the gods nor thunderbolts nor heaven's menacing rumbles could daunt; rather all the more they roused the ardor of his courage and made him long to be the first to burst the bolts and bars of nature's gates. And so his mind's might and vigor prevailed, and on he marched far beyond the blazing battlements of the world, in thought and understanding journeying all through the measureless universe; and from this expedition he returns to us in triumph with his spoils—knowledge of what can arise and what cannot, and again by what law [*ratio*] each thing has its scope restricted and its deeply implanted boundary stone. So now the situation is reversed: superstition is flung

down and trampled underfoot; we are raised to heaven by victory. (Lucr. 1.62–79, trans. Smith)

Lucretius summarizes several important observations and goals of the Epicurean approach. First, he observes that superstition diminishes human happiness. Humanity is “groveling” before it and “crushed” beneath it. Second, he explains the origin of that unhappiness: People are afraid of the myths told about the gods and meteorological phenomena, which they believe express divine anger. Third, through reasoning, Epicurus discovers the laws of nature that explain such phenomena. In explaining the natural causes of things, humanity is freed of its fears about divine retribution. Indeed, this freedom is the goal of Epicurus’ natural philosophy:

[11] If our suspicions about heavenly phenomena and about death did not trouble us at all and were never anything to us, ... then we would have no need for natural science. [12] It is impossible for someone ignorant about the nature of the universe but still suspicious about the subjects of the myths to dissolve his feelings of fear about the most important matters. So it is impossible to receive unmixed pleasures without knowing natural science. (RS 11–12 = Diog. Laert. 10.142–3, trans. Inwood and Gerson)

Epicurus’ maxims emphasize the necessity of natural philosophy, or “natural science” (*phusiologia*). Knowledge of nature, including human nature, rids of us of deep, disquieting anxieties: Knowledge of the natural causes of celestial and meteorological phenomena rids us of the fear that the gods are involved in human affairs because we will recognize that lightning is not caused by an angry god but rather by the collision of clouds (Lucr. 6.160–219.) Knowledge of human nature reveals that human beings are mortal and hence that their existence ends with their deaths. Without knowledge of the nature of things, one’s life is troubled by the suspicion that what is said about the gods and death may yet be true.

Living a pleasant and peaceful life is the goal of philosophy: “Do not believe,” wrote Epicurus, “that there is any other goal to be achieved by the knowledge of meteorological phenomena ... than freedom from disturbance and a secure conviction” (*Ep. Pyth.* 85 =Diog. Laert. 10.85, trans. Inwood and Gerson). Lucretius, whom Sedley (1998) characterizes as an Epicurean “fundamentalist,” preserved many of Epicurus’ naturalistic explanations: Book 5 comprises naturalistic explanations of the causes of the world, astronomical phenomena, and the development of human civilization; book 6, naturalistic explanations of meteorological phenomena and outbreaks of disease. What underlies the Epicurean account are canons of reasoning such as their empiricism and something like the law of parsimony (*Ep. Pyth.* 87–8 =Diog. Laert. 10.87–8; Asmis 2009; Striker 2020). Accordingly, the Epicureans argued that if naturalistic explanations offer a plausible account consistent with the phenomena, then it is not necessary to overdetermine them with further supernatural causes. Because lightning is explainable in terms of atoms and void, it is unnecessary to suppose the gods also have some causal role to play in its formation. In offering rational accounts of nature, the Epicureans aim to replace ignorance with knowledge and fears and anxieties with peace of mind: “Piety,” wrote Lucretius, “does not consist in [sacrifice and vows] but rather in possessing the ability to contemplate all things with a tranquil mind” (Lucr. 5.1198–1203, trans. Smith).

The Epicurean arguments against the irrational fear of death are closely tied to their critique of superstition. Just as knowledge of the true causes of natural phenomena frees us from fear of divine anger, knowledge of human mortality frees us from the terrors of the afterlife. Freedom from these painful emotional states is part of a pleasant and peaceful life, which is the goal of their philosophy. The Epicureans offered three kinds of arguments against the irrational

fear of death: [1] that death is not harmful, [2] that death cannot affect the one who dies, and [3] that it is rationally inconsistent to be concerned about death:

[1] Get used to believing that death is nothing to us. For all good and bad consists in sense-experience, and death is the privation of sense-experience. Hence, a correct knowledge of the fact that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life a matter of contentment, not by adding a limitless time [to life] but by removing the longing for immortality. (*Ep. Men.* 124 =Diog. Laert. 10.124, trans. Inwood and Gerson).

[2] So death, the most frightening of bad things, is nothing to us; since when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist. Therefore, it is relevant neither to the living nor to the dead, since it does not affect the former, and the latter do not exist. (*Ep. Men.* 125 =Diog. Laert. 10.125, trans. Inwood and Gerson)

[3] Look back now and consider how the bygone ages of eternity that elapsed before our birth were nothing to us. Here, then, is a mirror in which nature show us the time to come after our death. Do you see anything fearful in it? Do you perceive anything grim? Does it not appear more peaceful than the deepest sleep? (Lucr. 3.972–7, trans. Smith)

The conclusion of each of these three Epicurean arguments is that death is nothing to us, and because it is irrational to fear what is nothing to us, it is irrational to fear death. Removing this fear, as Epicurus wrote, makes “life a matter of contentment.” Moreover, each of the three arguments flows from Epicurean empiricism and materialism.

The first argument is based on Epicurean empiricism. The Epicureans held that what is good or bad is ultimately reducible to pleasure or pain. Pleasure and pain must be experienced by the senses, but because in death there is no sense-experience, there can be neither pleasure nor pain. Consequently, death is neither pleasant nor painful. It is nothing to us.

The second argument is based on Epicurean materialism. The Epicureans held that at death the atoms that make up the body and mind are dispersed. While the atoms themselves remain unchanged, the particular arrangement that made up the person is gone. In other words, she no longer exists. When death arrives, however, this marks the limit of the person's existence. Nothing that is the person persists. Hence, death and the one who is dying never coexist. What do not coexist cannot affect each other. Accordingly, death is nothing to us.

The third argument, which was recorded by Lucretius, is not explicitly empiricist or materialist, although the two doctrines are its foundation. This argument, called The Symmetry Argument, is not specifically about fear of the afterlife but the anxiety over postmortem nonexistence. Lucretius invites us to consider an analogy: Think of the time before one's birth. We are not anxious about this period of nonexistence. It is nothing to us. Our nonexistence after our death is no different. Hence, if we are not anxious about the former, we should not be anxious about the latter. According to the Epicureans, of course, the two periods of nonexistence are identical since each is a time when the material constituents that either will comprise or have comprised the person are dispersed. Likewise, the two periods of nonexistence are neither good nor bad since, given the person does not exist, neither does her body or mind through which she could experience pleasant or painful feelings. Therefore, it is rationally inconsistent to believe that one period of nonexistence is nothing but the other, which is identical to it, is bad.

The Epicureans believed these three arguments served to rid us of these deepest and most painful emotional states, the fears and anxieties about death.¹⁰ Taken with their critique of superstition and their views on pleasure, they are part of a philosophic therapy that leads to a pleasant and peaceful life.

3.2. Cārvāka Antireligious Ethics

The Cārvākas were also severely critical of religion. Like the Buddhists and Jainas, they were *nāstika*, or heterodox, philosophers, who denied the authority of the Vedas, although the Cārvākas went further in denying both karmic retribution and the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. This criticism followed from their naturalistic approach. Consider the following verses attributed to the legendary founder of the Cārvākas, Bṛhaspati:

[1.] There is no heaven, no final liberation, nor any soul in another world.

Nor do the actions of the four castes, orders, etc., produce any real effect.

[2.] Bṛhaspati says—The Agnihotra, the three Vedas, the ascetic's three staves, and smearing one's self with ashes,—(all these) are the livelihood of those destitute of knowledge and manliness.

[3.] If a beast slain in the Jyotiṣṭoma rite will itself go to heaven.

Why then does not the sacrificer forthwith offer his own father?

[9.] Hence it is only as a means of livelihood that the Brahmans have established (it) here.

All these ceremonies for the dead,—there is no other fruit anywhere.

[10.] The three authors of the Vedas are buffoons, knaves, and demons.

[...]

(trans. in Bhattacharya 2011, 84–5, 91–2; cf. *SDS* ch. 1, 10–11)

These verses are severe in their condemnation of religion. They specifically target the Vedic sacrificial rituals of the Brāhminical priests. The ends they recommended, religious duty (*dharma*) and spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*), according to the Cārvākas, are empty. The arguments here are often elliptical or presupposed. The Cārvākas held that only material bodies are real and that sense-perception is the only reliable source of knowledge. Because the sacrifice, religious duty, and spiritual liberation are not verifiable by perceptual evidence and lack any observable

effects, they are empty. According to the orthodox view, religious duty produced good consequences (“fruit”) that ripen in successive lives. Such a proposition, however, is impossible to verify for the Cārvākas because no perceptual evidence is available for its confirmation or disconfirmation. Indeed, the Cārvākas’ criticism of religion is even more cynical than the Epicureans’: They charged that the Brāhminical priests established religion, and the traditional hierarchical castes and social order (*varṇa*) attached to it, not because of any genuine moral or religious outlook but for their own material gain (cf. *SDS* ch. 1, 10–11; King 1999, 18–9; Bhattacharya 2011, 84–5, 91–2; Gokhale 2015, 151–3).

They also charged that religious practice is rationally inconsistent. The argument is elliptical, but it could be plausibly expanded as follows. If a ritually sacrificed animal goes to heaven, then one should sacrifice one’s own father, that is, because heaven is the best, one should wish the best for one’s father, and if it is in one’s power to achieve what is best, one should do it. But the religious practitioner does not sacrifice his father. Why? Because among the propositions rationally inconsistent with each other, the one abandoned in practice is the efficacy of the sacrifice itself. Hence, according to the Cārvākas, even the Brāhminical priests in practice do not adhere to their own views. Or, if they refuse to admit this, they are hypocrites (Gokhale 2015, 152). This is why the Cārvāka aphorisms reject religious duty and deny the reliability of the Vedas as a source of knowledge: “[V.1] Religious act (*dharma*) is not to be performed. [V.2] Its (religion’s) instructions are not to be relied upon” (trans. in Bhattacharya 2011, 80, 87). Indeed, it is on account of a lack of evidence that the Cārvākas reject the soul, the afterlife, and the efficacy of the ritual: “[IV.1] There is no means of knowledge for determining (the existence of) the other-world. [IV.2] There is no other-world because of the absence of any other-worldly

being (i.e., the transmigrating self). [IV.3] Due to the insubstantiality of consciousness (residing in the other-world)” (trans. in Bhattacharya 2011, 80, 87).

Like the Epicureans, the Cārvākas’ understanding of death was tied to their criticism of religion. Unlike the Epicureans, however, the evidence does not suggest that ridding us of our fear of death was a prominent aim of the Cārvākas’ polemic. In the Indian context, their views on death were part of their rejection of karmic retribution. Although their negative argument is intended to reject karma, there is also positive dimension to their view. They positively affirm life in this world. Indeed, they are not just critics of the otherworldly orientation of the Brāhminical priests but the life-denying asceticism of the Buddhists and Jainas as well: “[12.] O, the naked one (Jain), ascetic (Buddhist), dimwit, given to practicing physical hardship! Who taught you this way of leading life?” (trans. in Bhattacharya 2011, 85, 92). Since the Cārvākas held that this life in this world is our only life, they affirm that it is the site of value. So, our actions should not aim for rewards accrued beyond this world of experience but rather life should be lived in its best condition, that is, pleasantly.¹¹ Hence, the following verses are attributed to the Cārvākas: “[7.] While life remains let a man live happily (*sukha*); nothing is beyond death./ When once the body becomes ashes, how can it ever return again?” (trans. in Bhattacharya 2011, 84, 91, cf. 94)

4. LIVES OF PLEASURE

Both the Cārvākas and Epicureans identified pleasure as the value that guides human action: What one should do always refers to a way of life that secures pleasure and removes suffering (*SDS*, ch.1, 3–4; *RS* 25 =Diog. Laert. 10.148). Whereas the evidence for the ethics of the Epicureans preserves their understanding and arguments in their own words, the evidence for the Cārvākas is less clear (Bhattacharya 2011, 71–8). Scholars have suggested a philosophical

connection between Cārvāka and Epicurean ethics. Bhattacharya (2011, 201–2) argues that the charge of sensual excess against the Cārvākas was an intentional misrepresentation probably invented by the Vedāntin philosophers recording their views. He suggests that these misrepresentations preserved in Indian philosophy and literature is comparable to the misrepresentations of Epicurus as a vulgar hedonist (Bhattacharya 2011, 30, 125, 170; Ramelli 2014).¹² In my view, this sentiment is generally right, especially considering the later treatment of the Epicureans by early Christian philosophers (Ramelli 2014; Ramelli 2020). Bhattacharya, however, thinks we are not yet able to elaborate further. In their published conversation, Del Toso (2011, 199) asks him whether it is helpful to consider Epicurean ethics in order to understand the Cārvākas, and he replies that “[u]nfortunately we have absolutely no evidence to answer your question properly. The fragments so far collected say practically nothing of the Cārvāka ethics. However, I have tried to show that the Cārvākas were as much maligned as Epicurus.” Moreover, quoting Epicurus’ *Letter to Menoeceus*, Bhattacharya suggests that “[i]t is probable that the Cārvākas too believed in this view of life [that life’s goal is pleasure understood as freedom from mental and bodily pain] and held the pursuit of the real nature of things” (Del Toso 2011, 199; *Ep. Men.* 131 =Diog. Laert. 10.131).

More recently, Gokhale (2015) offers a reconstruction that goes further than Bhattacharya. Using Bentham’s utilitarianism as a “methodological tool,” he develops a plausible philosophical account of Cārvāka hedonism (Gokhale 2015, 162–9.). Specifically, he contrasts the Cārvākas’ this-worldly approach to pleasure with the orthodox Brāhminical philosophers, who identified superior other-worldly pleasures in the forms of heaven or blissful spiritual liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (Gokhale 2015, 168–9). Of course,

as we have seen, the Cārvākas found no evidence for such transcendent pleasures and were severely critical of those who recommend them as the goals of life.

While I find Bhattacharya's negative arguments and Gokhale's positive reconstructions convincing, I believe the comparison between the ethics of the Cārvākas and Epicureans should emphasize their naturalistic approach (McEvelley 2002, 602–3). The identification of pleasure as life's goal is ultimately an appeal to nature as the norm of moral life. The Epicureans developed their naturalistic ethics from an analysis of human nature. I believe there are hints of a similar approach in the Cārvākas. Of course, we must keep in mind the usual proviso that the evidence for the Cārvākas is limited.

Epicurus identified pleasure as the norm that nature reveals. His argument is sometimes called The Cradle Argument because it appeals to the newborn child as “an authentic witness to the true human good” (Nussbaum 1994, 107).¹³ In his dialogue *De finibus* (*On moral ends*) (=Cic. *Fin.*), Cicero preserved the argument in the words of his Epicurean spokesman Torquatus:

As soon as each animal is born, it seeks pleasure and rejoices in it as the highest good, and rejects pain as the greatest bad thing, driving it away from itself as effectively as it can; and it does this while it is still not corrupted, while the judgement of nature herself is unperverted and sound. Therefore, [Epicurus] says that there is no need of a reason or debate about why pleasure is to be pursued and pain to be avoided. He thinks that these things are perceived, as we perceive that fire is hot, that snow is white, that honey is sweet. None of these things requires confirmation by sophisticated argumentation; it is enough to have them pointed out.... Moreover, since there is nothing left if you deprive man of his sense-perception, it is necessary that nature herself judge what is natural and what is unnatural. And what does nature perceive or judge, with reference to what does

she decide to pursue or avoid something, except pleasure and pain? (Cic. *Fin.* 1.30, trans. Inwood and Gerson)

Three important observations are notable here. First, Epicurus appealed to how all newborn animals behave. They shun pain and seek pleasure. Second, the newborn is an “authentic witness” because she has not yet formed beliefs or habits from the wider culture about what is good or bad. What is true for us today and true for the Epicureans in their time is that the beliefs and habits handed down to us by our cultures and environments may be false and debilitating. Consequently, it would be difficult to select genuine natural impulses from false or empty ones without an authentic witness. This is why Epicurus argued the newborn is a fitting exemplar. She is “uncorrupted” and, hence, she shuns pain and seeks pleasure naturally. There is only her own nature that selects what is congenial to herself, and its criteria are pleasure and pain. Third, the proof that pleasure is sought and pain shunned is in perceiving pleasure and pain. That pleasure is pleasing is like the hotness of fire or the whiteness of snow. That fire is hot or snow is white does not need to be proven by logical demonstration. We perceive that they are so, and this argument is consistent with Epicurus’ empiricism—that every sense-perception is true and only mistaken judgment about sense-perception introduces error and false belief.

Epicurus anticipated that the consequences of his argument would be misunderstood. Accordingly, he offered recommendations about how we ought to organize our practical lives with pleasure as life’s goal. Undoubtedly, his opponents wished to dismiss his philosophy, believing it recommended a life of vulgar hedonism. In anticipation, Epicurus argued that there are two kinds of pleasure (Cic. *Fin.* 1.37–8; Diog. Laert. 10.34). One is the experience of a present pleasurable feeling, the satisfaction of a need like drinking a cold beverage on a hot day. The other is the experience of the absence of mental and bodily pain. The latter, however, is not

solely negative but includes the positive experience of the healthy, natural functioning of an active body and mind. Hence, Epicurus wrote: “The cry of the flesh: not to be hungry, not to be thirsty, not to be cold. For if someone has these things and is confident of having them in the future, he might contend even with Zeus for happiness” (SV 33, trans. Inwood and Gerson). Epicurus’ opponents were mistaken when they dismissed his argument because they believed he was recommending present pleasurable feelings as the goal of life when, in fact, he was recommending freedom from mental and bodily pain and the attendant healthy natural condition of the human being. Thus, he advised his student Menoeceus:

So when we say pleasure is the goal we do not mean the pleasures of the profligate or the pleasures of consumption, as some believe, either from ignorance and disagreement or from deliberate misinterpretation, but rather the lack of pain in the body and disturbance in the soul. For it is not drinking bouts and continuous partying and enjoying boys and women or consuming fish and the other dainties of an extravagant table, which produce the pleasant life, but sober calculation which searches out the reason for every choice and avoidance and drives out the opinions which are the source of the greatest turmoil for men’s souls. (*Ep. Men.* 131–2 = Diog. Laert. 10.131–2, trans. Inwood and Gerson)

Besides denying the charge of vulgar hedonism and highlighting the true goal as freedom from mental and bodily pain, Epicurus also recommended how we should organize our practical lives. First, we must rationally reflect on the causes of what we desire. Second, we must use that same rational reflection to reject falsehoods that disturb and terrify us, namely, superstition. So Epicurus’ hedonism is hardly vulgar. His advice on the best way of life is intelligent and careful. Indeed, Epicurus himself lived a simple and virtuous life among a close circle of friends who shared his philosophical interests. “It is impossible,” Epicurus wrote, “to live pleasantly without

living prudently, honourably, and justly and impossible to live prudently, honorably, and justly without living pleasantly. And whoever lack this cannot live pleasantly” (*RS* 5, trans. Inwood and Gerson).

The evidence shows that the Cārvākas, like the Epicureans, also identified pleasure as the goal of life. Because this testimony is preserved by the Cārvākas’ opponents, their position is framed in their opponents’ language. Specifically, the Cārvākas are said to have identified pleasure (*kāma*) as the goal (*puruṣārtha*) (*SDS*, ch. 1, 3). This language belongs to the Brāhminical philosophers and their doctrine of the four ends of human life—pleasure, wealth, religious duty, and spiritual liberation (Bhattacharya 2011, 93–4; Gokhale 2015, 169–78). The Cārvākas themselves may not have used this language to express their own views. Nevertheless, the evidence is useful when taken together with what else we can more confidently identify as genuine Cārvāka doctrine. Given the Cārvākas’ antireligious polemic, we know that they rejected religious duty (*dharma*). Furthermore, given that they denied any other life beyond this, we know that they rejected spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*). Wealth (*artha*), or material prosperity, we might surmise would be instrumentally valuable insofar as it could produce pleasure or remove suffering. Along these lines, Gokhale (2015, 165) suggests, on the evidence of Kauṭīliya’s *Arthaśāstra* (ca. second and third centuries CE), that the Cārvākas took a special interest in the applied sciences, like economics and law, which would provide “social security and stability for the pursuit of consistent and durable pleasures.” Hence, Kauṭīliya identified the Cārvākas as rational inquirers (*ānvīkṣikī*) (Halbfass 1988, 263–86; King 1999, 33–4).¹⁴ Through rational reflection, practical life could be organized around enjoying stable pleasures. Like the Epicureans, the Cārvākas thus rejected the pleasures of profligacy and parties because, upon rational reflection and comparative measurement, they lead to more pain than pleasure (cf. *Ep.*

Men. 128–32 =Diog. Laert. 10.128–32). Also like the Epicureans, they held that economic and legal expertise would be advantageous for the coordination and governance of individuals in society (cf. Hermarchus quoted in Porph. *Abst.* 1.7.10–13).

Like the Epicureans, the Cārvākas were also falsely accused of vulgar hedonism. But what did the Cārvākas mean by pleasure? Did they, like Epicurus, also argue for pleasure as freedom of mental and bodily pain, which is best achieved through intelligence, moderation, and a simple lifestyle? It is difficult to answer these questions with precision. Nevertheless, I think we can identify hints of the Cārvākas answers.

The Cārvākas' understanding of pleasure should be understood in the context of debate with their opponents (Gokhale 2015, 162–9). It is not surprising that the Brāhminical philosophers, who have preserved the Cārvākas' views, identified the Cārvāka understanding of pleasure as sensualist. Consistent with their materialism and empiricism, the Cārvākas must have recognized as obviously true that pleasure is felt. The Cārvākas offered as examples the pleasure of sex and the pain of thorns as a contrast with the spiritual pleasures identified by their opponents (Gokhale 2015, 168–9). Consistent with their antireligious polemic, they identified producing pleasure and removing suffering as a matter of practical importance in this world. It does not follow from this identification that one should go after pleasure at the cost of suffering serious pain. It is true that the human condition is such that pleasure is often accompanied by pain, but admitting this does not imply that every pleasure is worth going in for despite its pain. Furthermore, admitting this does not imply that the application of rational reflection and comparative measurement would not recommend moderation and simplicity over and against unrestrained excess. Even the Cārvākas of the *SDS*, who deny the reliability of inference, are able to perceive successful selections of pleasant living and choose pragmatically. Moreover,

their opponents' appeals to spiritual pleasure in another world, according to the Cārvākas, are ultimately beyond the ken of human experience and reasoning, and such a hypothesis is unnecessary for living a pleasant and successful life.

The Cārvākas' understanding of pleasure should also be understood in the context of their naturalism (*svabhāvavāda*). The Cārvākas held that the essential characteristics of things could be explained by their inherent natures. The following verse is attributed to the Cārvākas: "The fire is hot, the water cold, refreshing cool the breeze of morn;/ By whom came this variety? From their own nature was it born" (*SDS*, ch. 1, 10, trans. Cowell and Gough). Fire is hot by its nature, water is cold by its nature, and the breeze is not only cool but also refreshingly pleasant to human beings by its nature. Like the Epicureans, the Cārvākas claimed these essential characteristics are perceived. They simply belong to the real nature of things. No further proof is necessary nor could one be offered. Moreover, the Cārvākas claimed "our nature instinctively recognises [pleasure] as congenial" (*SDS*, ch. 1, 3, trans. Cowell and Gough). This claim is even more explicit in another doxographical work, Ps.-Śaṅkara's *Sarva-Siddhānta-Saṃgraha* (=SSS) (*Collection of the Six Systems*) (ca. eleventh century CE): "A man feels pleasure and pain by nature, and there is no other cause (for it)," that is, there is no supernatural cause, such as karmic retribution, that plays a causal role in it (SSS, ch. 2, 5, trans. Raṅgācārya).¹⁵ This evidence, in my view, shows the Cārvākas argued that nature is the norm of moral life, and there is no supernatural norm. Moreover, nature reveals that pleasure is noninstrumentally valuable because human beings naturally choose it and avoid its opposite, pain. While no argument like The Cradle Argument has come down to us, there is reason to believe the Cārvākas offered an argument like it. The Cārvākas' suspicion about the motives of the broader Brāhminical culture and its hierarchical social order shows that they, like the Epicureans, also believed that culture

and the environment could corrupt one's natural motives. This is why they were critical of severe asceticism: It was a motive corrupted by the influence of superstition. Their cynicism about religion shows that they believed the Brāhminical priests, although they may not have recognized it themselves, also were pursuing pleasure as their goal when they practiced the sacrifice as their livelihood at the top of the social hierarchy. If we take this along with the evidence of the *Arthaśāstra*, the argument is even further strengthened. The application of rational inquiry would thus not be limited to the coordination and organization of applied sciences in society but also must apply to the governance of an individual life to remove suffering and enjoy stable pleasures. Indeed, this underscores why the Cārvākas, like the Epicureans, targeted traditional religion. Its views were mistakenly oriented and the fear and violence its culture instituted was an impediment to enjoying a life free from mental and bodily pain.

Ultimately, placing the Cārvākas' philosophy alongside the Epicureans' helps us see what arguments they probably offered in favor of their views. Their ethics is far from the vulgar hedonism, of which they are accused. My arguments, however, are not merely negative but also positive. They show that there is reason to believe that the Cārvākas held nature as their norm of moral life, that it reveals pleasure as the value that guides human action, and that producing pleasure and removing suffering ought to be accomplished through living intelligently and simply.

5. CONCLUSION

In light of this essay's arguments that have emphasized similarities, before concluding, we should note some important differences that indicate further paths for research. Besides this, the comparisons in this essay have mostly drawn on the structure of Epicurean argument as a guide to a more plausible account of Cārvāka argument as a coherent philosophical system. This

strategy may give the false impression that comparative work is only accomplished traveling from Greece to India. This impression is an accident of the available evidence.

Along these lines, let me emphasize an important difference in the core comparison of the two philosophies' critiques of religion. The Epicurean critique of popular religion did not deny the existence of gods and even allowed some participation in traditional rites, provided one had the correct beliefs about gods and nature. The Cārvāka critique, however, thoroughly condemns religion. The verses quoted at the conclusion of the Cārvāka doxography in the *SDS* explicitly target the rational inconsistency of sacrifices (*SDS* ch. 1, 10–11). Particularly, these sacrifices include killing and consuming animals, which were “commanded by ... demons” (*SDS* ch. 1, 11). Indeed, Mādhava, the doxographer, suggests that the Cārvākas may have been motivated out of compassion for living beings. Although animals play a key role in The Cradle Argument and Lucretius suggests humans and animals have a relation of guardianship, evidence about Epicurean ethical consideration of animals is limited (*Lucr.* 5.855–877). Classical Indian philosophy, however, is replete with ethical consideration of animals, not only from the Cārvākas but also from the other critics of the Vedas, the Buddhists and Jainas. So, here perhaps we may see a comparative path from India to Greece. But one to take in another essay.

In conclusion, the Cārvākas and the Epicureans both developed philosophies as ways of life. Their thought reflects a careful and intelligent assessment of the world and humanity's place in it. They both contrast sharply with rival philosophies in India and in Greece. Whereas their rivals had transcendent, spiritual orientations that placed the human intellect at its center, the Cārvākas and Epicureans focused on this life in this world and the practical problem of living pleasantly and successfully in it. Their views still have relevance today: that claims must be tested against the evidence of experience, that what we choose and desire must be assessed

carefully by comparative measure and rational reflection, and that a pleasant life is easy to attain provided one knows the nature of things.

NOTES

I would like to thank *Philosophy East and West*'s anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

1 – Two such important doxographical works that preserve the materialist traditions of classical Greece and classical India are, respectively, Diogenes Laërtius' *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* (=Diog. Laert.) (ca. third century CE) (Hicks 1925) and Sāyana-Mādhava's *Sarva-darśana-saṃgraha* (=SDS) (*Collection of All Philosophical Systems*) (ca. fourteenth century CE) (Cowell and Gough 1882). English translations are available online: Diog. Laert. is available on *The Perseus Digital Library* at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text.jsp?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0258>, and the SDS is available on the *Internet Archive* at <https://archive.org/details/thesarvadarsanas00madhuoft>. Epicureanism is reviewed in Diog. Laert., bk. 10. Cārvāka thought is reviewed in SDS, ch. 1. For doxographies in India see Halbfass 1988, 349–368.

2 – Among the ancient Greek materialists, *De rerum natura* (=Lucr.) (*On the nature of things*), the didactic poem of the Roman Epicurean Lucretius (ca. first century BCE), is wholly extant and provides arguments for Epicurus' philosophy. Similarly, the *Tattva-upaplava-siṃha* (=TUS) (*Lion of the destruction of principles*) of Jayarāśi (ca. eighth century CE) offers arguments in favor of skepticism and is the only wholly extant work of Cārvāka philosophy. Jayarāśi's skepticism is one of several diverse approaches within a broader Cārvāka "school."

3 – I refer to the classical Indian materialists as Cārvākas. However, there is considerable scholarly controversy about the application of the name Cārvāka and an older name Lokāyata. It is beyond the scope of this essay to review the full debate. But briefly: both the materialist school and its adherents are identified in the classical period as Cārvāka or Lokāyata/Lokāyatika. Cārvāka is used for the first time to name this philosophical tradition in the Jaina doxography *Ṣaḍdarśanasamuccaya* by Haribhadra (ca. eighth century CE). Before the eighth century, Cārvāka only appears as the name of a demon. Lokāyata, however, is used to describe a science of dialectical reasoning, but, again, evidence is limited. Lokāyata may be related to *loka*, “world.” It appears along with several dialectically opposed theses about the world (Jayatilleke 1963, 55–65; Franco 2018). But as Franco (2018, under “Cārvāka/Lokāyata in the Classical Period”) argues, “[i]n the absence of appropriate evidence, all attempts to explain the historical development from *lokāyata* as a science of disputation dealing with theses about the world, as well as from Cārvāka as the name of a demon in the *Mahābhārata*, to a philosophical tradition or school of thought and to its adherents, must remain a matter of speculation.” Additionally, it is generally agreed that Cārvāka philosophy accommodated internal diversity throughout its development. See Jayatilleke 1963, Gokhale 2015, Mills 2015 and Mills 2018. Bhattacharya in his interview with Del Toso 2011, 189 limits Cārvāka to materialism and, hence, rejects the skeptic Jayarāśi. Franco 2018 argues that Jayarāśi’s skepticism is an argumentative development well-suited to refuting the Cārvākas’ opponents.

4 – Barua 1921 and Basham 1951 include Ajita Keśakambalin as a forerunner of the Cārvākas. Warder 1956 and McEvilley 2002 also compare Epicurean ethics to early Buddhism.

5 – Ramelli 2014, 6 describes the early Christian philosophers’ distortions of Epicurus’ hedonism: “[The Epicurean] ideal of pleasure (*hēdonē*)...was grossly misunderstood or distorted

by the[ir] opponents..., who generally did not take into consideration the moderation, equilibrium, and serenity that the superior ‘catastematic pleasure’ (Epicurus’s real ideal of pleasure) involved.”

6 – Cārvāka thought comprises more diversity than Epicureanism. This diversity is clearest in Cārvāka epistemology. The Cārvākas include empiricists similar to the Epicureans but also skeptics and “extreme” empiricists who denied that inference from sense-perceptions was a secure means to knowledge. On diverse theories of knowledge among the Cārvākas, see Jayatilleke 1963, Gokhale 2015, Mills 2015 and Mills 2018. On Epicurean epistemology, or “canonic,” see Asmis 2009 and Striker 2020.

7 – To matter the Epicureans add void. On the Epicurean account of matter and void, see Sedley 1999, 362–82 and Konstan 2020, 60–2. It is uncertain if the Cārvākas were atomists.

8 – A commentator on Haribhadra’s *Ṣaḍdarśanasamuccaya* claimed the Cārvākas also accepted space-ether as a fifth element but probably not because of space’s nonresistance to matter but because of the general view in classical Indian philosophy that sound was a quality of space. See Franco 2018, under “The Doxographies.”

9 – The Epicureans were not atheists (*Ep. Men.* 123–4 = Diog. Laert. 10.123–4). Indeed, according to Diogenes Laërtius, Epicurus was regarded as a pious man, no doubt on account of his correct views about the gods (Diog. Laert. 10.10). But, as Spinelli and Verde 2020, 102 argue, Epicurus “regarded [traditional religion] as essentially a kind of superstition that blocks the way toward the achievement of imperturbability.”

10 – Epicurean arguments about death have stimulated considerable interest. See, for example, Nagel 1971, Nussbaum 1994, and Rosenbaum 2020.

11 – Jayarāśi concludes his skeptical work with a similar emphasis on the pleasure produced by philosophical critique (*TUS* 14.5). On this delightful life without philosophical deliberation, see Franco 1987, 44; De Jong 1989; and Mills 2015, 518.

12 – Bhattacharya 2011 cites Horace’s *Epistle* 1.4, written to Tibullus. In this letter, Horace exhorted Tibullus to live a life of withdrawal from politics. This advice has Epicurean lineage. The polemic of Plutarch records the Epicurean maxim “Live unnoticed” (Plut. *Mor. De lat. viv.* 1128c9, 1129b1). Epicurus argued that the fear and anxiety engendered by political life outweighs any advantages one might gain from wielding power (*RS* 14). Horace concluded his letter by identifying himself as a “pig from Epicurus’ herd” with a wink of self-deprecation. This was hardly slander. If anything, it reflected a “playful fondness” for Epicureanism (Yona 2018, 17). Although Bhattacharya has misunderstood Horace, the sentiment of his view is generally correct. Horace’s witticism works only if it was a commonplace to think of the Epicurean life as the life of swine, and certainly the early Christian philosophers misunderstood the Epicureans as vulgar hedonists, e.g., Justin Martyr (ca. second century CE) and Origen (ca. third century CE), references in Ramelli 2014. More recently, Ramelli 2020 reviews early Christian attacks on Epicurus’ denial of divine providence.

13 – For a discussion of The Cradle Argument, see Tsouna 2020, 145–9.

14 – Kauṭīliya uses “Lokāyata” to refer the classical Indian materialist tradition.

15 – The *Sarva-Siddhānta-Saṃgraha* is also available on the *Internet Archive* at <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.408474>.

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